

## PANEL SHOW

*The Ros Tapestry*







**One of the most** important endeavours in the textile world is nearing completion. It is the Ros Tapestry, consisting of 15 large panels (137x183cm) which has been stitched by 150 volunteers from the town of New Ross in The Republic of Ireland.

Like the Bayeux Tapestry, it is not in fact a tapestry but crewelwork embroidery. So much one can know in advance, but to enter the exhibition space and see the magnificent panels is to be truly awed by their artistry and the quality of the stitching. This is a major work of art: a national treasure, certain to have great international appeal.

Three elements have come together to make it such a success. Firstly, the design of the panels, each of which represents an event in the history of the area, was undertaken by a major international artist, Ann Griffin Bernstorff. Her flowing, almost magical style has proved ideal for both the subject matter and its translation into embroidery. Secondly, the expertise of her daughter Alexis Bernstorff, a textile conservator who assisted in choosing the historic incidents to depict as well as translating her mother's oil cartoons into stitchable embroidery designs, and finding and training the volunteer stitchers. Lastly, the commitment of the community of 150 embroiderers who worked on the tapestry over the course of 15 years.

It was the rector of New Ross, the Rev. Paul Mooney who had the idea. With the Bayeux Tapestry in mind he wondered if the forgotten importance of New Ross' Norman origins might be

the basis for something similar. He approached Ann Griffin Bernstorff who, before beginning to paint, studied the period at length. She was aided by a historian, the late Billy Colfer (whose doctorate was on Medieval Wexford), so that by the end of her research she could say what cattle cost under Brehon laws and how the Italian bankers who operated in medieval Ros were dressed.

From the outset volunteers, who as far as possible worked in groups in the actual areas which 'their' panel depicted, enjoyed the camaraderie that stitching together provided. Lasting friendships were made and many found it therapeutic. According to Ann Kienan who opened her home to a group, everyone got more out of it than they put in. 'I feel honoured to have played a small role in such a big part of our history', she says, 'It has also made me look at nature differently - now I see so many shades of green'. Each participant had to practise and then complete a sampler before being let loose on the real thing.

It was slow, exacting work to stitch events such as *The Battle of the Kingdom of Ossory*, which was worked at Rothe House, Kilkenny. The Jacobean panel is mounted on a wooden frame at which four people can sit facing the cartoon in order to refer to the exact colours required - chosen from 400 shades of Appleton two-ply wool.

Although the technique is like crewelwork and includes long and short stitches, French knots, bullion knots, long knots, (adapted to achieve curly hair, waves and armour), seeding and variations of

couching are employed here in a more descriptive way to create movement and texture.

One participant described it as 'painting with wool'. This is particularly apparent in the shading that is so important for facial expression. Often, two shades are used in one needle and tiny gaps are left to be filled in with a third shade. Ann Griffin is particularly good at depicting horses (of which there are many) and the way the muscles of their necks and haunches have been interpreted in shaded tones is astonishing. The tail of one horse in loose looped couching is a triumph of both embroidery and imagination.

There is so much in every panel which rewards careful scrutiny and this applies equally to the borders because, like the Bayeux Tapestry, each panel bears an upper and lower frieze showing tiny scenes which depict historical details, making a wonderful resource for teaching children history.

It was intended that the finished tapestry should hang in St Mary's Church which still looks much as it did in the panel *Gothic Glory*. Sadly, the church has been found unsuitable and it is clear that the space in which it now exhibited will not be big enough to display the completed tapestry to its best advantage. We can only hope a worthy home is soon found for this outstanding Irish work of art. ♦♦♦**Patricia Cleveland-Peck** [www.rosstapestry.com](http://www.rosstapestry.com). Travel courtesy of **Tourism Ireland**, [www.tourismireland.com](http://www.tourismireland.com) and **The Riverside Park Hotel, Enniscorthy** [www.riversideparkhotel.com](http://www.riversideparkhotel.com)